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Washington's Unique Fish

by Hal Beecher

"Just don't find any snail darters!" the landowner added after granting a couple of biologists permission to collect fish from his ponds.

While there are no darters in Washington, the state's Olympic mudminnow closely parallels the little fish that halted Tennessee's Tellico Dam. Both fishes are small, attaining maximum lengths of about three inches. Both have restricted geographic ranges. Neither fish is generally valued for sport or food.

The entire population of the Olympic mudminnow is confined to southwestern Washington and the Olympic Peninsula. Mudminnows inhabit sluggish, weedy waters of the Chehalis River system, from Rainbow Falls downstream to the swampy creeks on the north shore of Grays Harbor and northward along the Peninsula's coastal plain to Whale Creek, just south of the Queets River. An isolated population of mudminnows inhabits the fringes of Lake Ozette, the result of an introduction by humans a few years ago.

Mudminnows also thrive around Olympia in several marshy areas that drain into Puget Sound, including the Deschutes River. State wildlife biologist Kelly McAllister has discovered another population near The Evergreen State College, which extends the fish's range several miles westward into the Eld Inlet drainage.

How different, how special, is the Olympic mudminnow? Biologists are notorious for making much out of what seem to be insignificant and barely detectable differences. But the Olympic mudminnow is not just an imperfect copy of another common fish.

Its uniqueness can be seen by looking at its taxonomic status. The modern system of scientifically naming plants and animals was devised in 1758 by the Swedish biologist Linnaeus. It classifies living things according to progressively smaller groupings: kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus and species. The scientific name, usually Latin, by

which an organism is known includes its genus and species. The Olympic mudminnow is known as *Novumbra hubbsi*.

While many familiar ducks, for example, belong to the genus *Anas*, and many kinds of trout belong to the genus *Salmo*, the Olympic mudminnow is the only species in the genus *Novumbra*. At one time fish biologists even placed it in its own family, *Novumbridae*, but is now considered a member of the family *Umbridae*. This family includes other American representatives — one in Alaska, one in the Midwest, one in the Southeast — and a central European relative.

What catapulted the snail darter from obscurity to notoriety was not its localized distribution alone. It was the fact that completion of Tellico Dam threatened to extinguish its entire known population. The Olympic mudminnow probably does not face a similar fate in Washington. The mudminnow is non-migratory, and its habitat — small ponds and lakes in flat valleys or plains — is

poorly suited to dam construction. In the Northwest, it is the valuable steelhead and salmon runs that suffer most when dams are built. Loss of habitat may be the greatest threat to plants and animals, but the Olympic mudminnow has often been collected from roadside ditches and that habitat will not soon disappear.

But a threat to the existence of Washington's unique fish was identified in the spring of 1980. That year a fellow biologist, Robert Fernau, and I noted that mudminnows occurred in every oxbow lake along the Chehalis River system, except where non-native species were present. Where we collected bass, bluegill, pumpkinseed, warmouth or catfish, there were no mudminnows. Our observations lead us to believe that, as these eastern fishes spread, mudminnows will probably decline and possibly disappear.

The mudminnow is found in association with few other fish species. Only the three-spine stickleback consistently coexists with it. Other less frequent associates of the mudminnow include sculpins, dace, squawfish, young coho salmon and, probably, occasional cutthroat trout. But none are as voracious and at the same time well-adapted to still water as the eastern imports.

What value has the Olympic mudminnow — say compared to a bass which grows large and provides recreation and food in waters to which native game fishes are poorly adapted? Why try to preserve it?

But the Olympic mudminnow should be preserved to keep our options open for the future. According to legend, the British willingly relinquished what is now Washington because the salmon here wouldn't take a fly! As the value of our salmon has changed, so could the value of the mudminnow. It might someday hold an answer for medical researchers or take on some other, unanticipated value.

Beyond any scientific, economic or other yet unrealized use, the Olympic mudminnow is valued by people who are content just to know it is there. The knowledge of the fish's existence gives them pleasure, and if it were to vanish, they would keenly feel its loss. The Olympic mudminnow is part of our Washington heritage, and, as such, it's worth protecting. □

Hal Beecher is a wildlife biologist with the Game Department's Habitat Management Division.



Pam Wood

Biologist Hal Beecher found these Olympic mudminnows in a marsh near Tumwater. The fish are a dark, iridescent blue-green with vertical black bars. They grow to a maximum length of about three inches.

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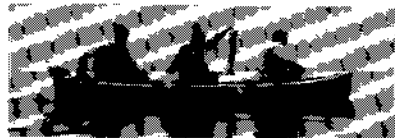
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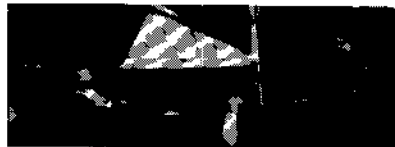
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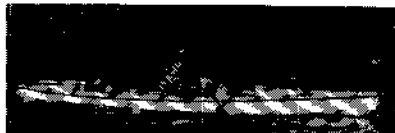
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